

February 28, 2011

Dear Appropriations Members:

I am writing as someone who has been working with Explorations Charter School in my capacity as an admissions counselor for the University of Connecticut; I work primarily for the UConn Torrington regional campus and we have had many Explorations graduates enroll here at UConn Torrington. It is also important to note that we have had at least three valedictorians and three salutatorians among those students admitted to UConn Torrington – and there have also been at least two valedictorians admitted to the main campus at Storrs. To my way of thinking, these admits are most certainly a testament to the fine work that is done at Explorations Charter School. I have tremendous respect for the accomplishments of Gail Srebnik, Executive Director and Principal at Explorations Charter School, and her staff in regard to helping students succeed in high school. I have seen some amazing results when reviewing transcripts of applicants from Explorations. The “turn around” is extraordinary.

I regret that I cannot give my testimony in person, because I really believe in Explorations Charter School and their mission – and it is somewhat difficult to convey the depth of that belief in writing. Thus, I hope that this letter will serve to help you understand how very important this school is not only to our community, but to the surrounding communities as well. Not only does Explorations serve the Winsted and Torrington areas, but students from Barkhamsted, Bloomfield, Canaan, Colebrook, Canton, Granby, Harwinton, Lakeville, Litchfield, New Hartford, Norfolk, Sharon, Simsbury and Watertown have attended and benefitted from the education they received at Explorations. I think I even remember speaking about college with a young man from New York who was attending Explorations to ensure that he received a better education.

I am currently on the Governing Council for Explorations – an invitation I accepted because, again, I so strongly believe in their mission and in what they do. I am well aware that many of the students who chose to attend Explorations might not have made it through high school at all had they remained in their original schools. The students who attend Explorations do so voluntarily – and they sign a contract with the school. These students realize the value of being in a learning community that supports them as individuals, and works with them to develop not only their academic skills, but their self-esteem and their sense of community awareness as well.

The parents of Explorations students also make a commitment when they select this school for their children. There is no transportation provided for students who do not live in the town where Explorations is located – but it clearly is worth the sacrifice of driving students to and from school to ensure that they receive a good high school education. I have spoken to several parents of Explorations students over the years, and they have only positive things to relate and are grateful that their children had this opportunity available.

Charter schools are most certainly something that we desperately need. There are far too many students who would most likely fall through the cracks without the option of charter schools, and we cannot afford to have more high school drop outs than we already do. I realize that this is a very trying year when it comes to budgets and funding, however the charter schools will have an almost impossible task to continue their work without any increase in per pupil funding. I know that this year Explorations had to limit their spending on major programs – which is unfortunate – and I am sure that other charter schools are experiencing much the same thing. Additionally, there have been increases in operating expenses which have made for an even “tighter” year – this cannot continue. Ms. Srebnik already spends too much of her valuable time seeking private and federal funds to help Explorations function as it should.

As Ms. Srebnik herself has stated, “Explorations can promise parents a small class size and individual attention to their children. Explorations graduates return every year to visit and share stories of success in college, pride in their workplace or military service and tales of their transformation into adults.” I,

myself, speak with Explorations graduates who are currently UConn students, and regularly hear from them how grateful they are for the opportunity they had to attend Explorations Charter School and how it turned their lives around enabling them to attend and succeed in college.

Please allow Explorations and the other charter schools to continue these healthy relationships with their students by supporting the goals of the charter school network.

Respectfully,

Dana Forchette
Senior Admissions Counselor
UConn Torrington Campus